

Goats On The Left

by Mike Ford

Forerunner, November 1994

Today we live in a very technological, industrialized world. We make our homes in crowded cities of hundreds of thousands of people. We drive highly sophisticated cars controlled by complicated computer components. We buy our food in supermarkets far removed from the farms, ranches, orchards, and fields where it is grown or raised.

Our world is a vastly different place than the agrarian world of the Bible. This difference in lifestyles puts those of us who grew up in cities at a disadvantage when it comes to fully understanding some of Christ's parables or various biblical metaphors. We simply lack the background.

For instance, the Bible's use of goats and sheep as metaphors for Christians is beyond many of us city folk. Most of us in the church seem to be more familiar with sheep. We hear a great deal about them in sermons and their attributes are fairly common knowledge: Christ is the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep (John 10:11, 14). We know many of the traits of sheep through studies into Psalm 23 and John 10.

But our mental picture of goats is usually vague. We may think they regularly eat soup cans and butt unsuspecting souls bent over to tie their shoes. We will see that the attributes of goats, however, should not to be taken lightly.

A Mixed Bag

God uses the goat to symbolize evil in numerous instances in the Bible. In Zechariah 10:3 (KJV) He says He will punish the goats. In Matthew 25:31-46 Christ's Parable of the Sheep and the Goats tells of His return and of judging the nations. In verse 33 He says, "And He [Christ] will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left." The sheep are then given eternal life, but the goats are cast into the Lake of Fire. It should be abundantly clear from this section of Scripture that we want the attributes of sheep and not those of goats!

What is it about goats that causes God to use them in such a negative light? Goats have many admirable qualities. They are intelligent, sensitive, playful, quick to respond to individual attention and affection. Sounds good, right?

But wait, there is much more! Goats are capricious. They are impulsive and unpredictable, devious and contrary. When they are grazing, it is not unusual to see several with their heads through a fence, straining to reach the grass that is always greener on the other side! Folklore says that goats have slit eyes to enable them to see around corners where the grazing is better. If they are not poking their heads through fences, they may be standing on their hind legs, stretching for those tender leaves just out of reach. Goats are never content with what they have.

They are experts in opening gates and squeezing through small gaps because they hate to be confined. Fences that will handle sheep, cattle, and horses will not hold goats. They will work tirelessly to spring themselves from any situation they deem inhibiting.

Consequently, goats are not very good followers. "Gregarious behavior" is a term that refers to the flocking or herding instinct which is found strongly in sheep, cattle, and horses. Again, this quality is rather weak in goats; they prefer leading or going off on their own. Meat packers use this instinct in sheep and goats to their advantage. They will train an old goat, appropriately called a "Judas," to lead sheep to the pens for slaughter. A well-trained Judas will lead group after group of sheep to the slaughter all day long. Consider that!

A Few Anecdotes

Goats also possess a stubborn streak. A friend once tried to move a goat in a certain direction. He grabbed it by the horns and pushed and pulled and tugged. No matter how or in what direction he tried to move the goat, it resisted. He could not budge it one inch. Then, when he let go, it just trotted off—in the direction the goat wanted to go in!

Another friend grew up on a farm and has a long experience with goats. As a youth he and his brother and sister more or less turned some goats into pets. Once, after the big noon meal, his mother took the kids down the road to their grandfather's house. Knowing they would not be gone very long, his mother decided not to clear the table. When they returned home, though, they found the biggest of the goats standing right in the middle of the table, amidst all the dishes and leftovers. The screen door had been no match for Billy!

One night before they had electricity installed in their house, his mother picked up a lamp and went to a back bedroom. Moments later the family heard her screaming, "Someone's in there!" Grabbing his gun, his father went to confront the intruder. Instead of a burglar, he found the same goat in the bed—under the covers!—with only his eyes peering out! Goats are intelligent and playful but impulsive, unpredictable, and devious.

By now, a goat's characteristics should be clear. They are not evil, but some of their traits could be deadly—spiritually—if found in a Christian. What would we call a Christian who is unpredictable? A goat! Or one who thinks he is above it all? A goat! Or one who independently does his own thing? A goat! What would we call a Christian who wants to take over, has trouble functioning in a group, and does not want to be led? A goat!

A Warning to Leaders

In chapter 3 of his epistle, the apostle James has some interesting advice for those among us who would be leaders. He cautions them about the higher standard God would hold them to. Then he writes:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. (James 3:13-14)

It seems as if he is describing sheep in verse 13 and goats in verse 14.

In *Halley's Bible Handbook*, p. 660, the commentator writes regarding these verses:

This passage seems to be aimed at certain loquacious teachers, who, bigoted over some pet doctrine, with little personal affection for Christ, and ambitious to be considered brilliant in argument, were producing only jealousy and faction.

Goats in a congregation tend to divide it, leading the sheep astray.

Many of us probably have goat-like characteristics. Some good, some bad. Most of us know these things about ourselves, and we try hard not to admit them. But now that we understand the biblical metaphor about goats, and what Christ says their ultimate end will be, we can look on this side of ourselves in a more urgent light.

A Christian cannot stand still, yet not all movement is proper growth. A Christian's life must move in the right direction, along the path that leads to the Kingdom of God. We do not want to be sidetracked, to follow a road of our own choosing, on a whim or out of stubbornness or independence.

A sheep follows its Shepherd, peacefully moving forward with the flock. He is content to be led because he has faith in Him. A sheep responds to his Shepherd's voice and goes where He directs.

A goat follows only its own lead, creating disunity when he comes in contact with others in the flock. Because of his independent nature, he often finds himself in contention with the Shepherd for leadership of the flock, leading some astray. A goat often eats things sheep would avoid because they have no value and cause sickness.

These are serious spiritual characteristics. Which are you, a sheep or a goat?